

# **Building Resilience: Helping Your Child Cope with Frustrations at School**

*by Lilian G. Katz*

Lilian G. Katz—parent of three, grandparent of five, internationally acclaimed child-development expert, and director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois—shares strategies that will help you help your child overcome occasional and, yes inevitable, frustrations, fears, and disappointments at school.

## **When the Going Gets Tough...**

Your children—like mine and all others—are bound to experience frustrations, distress, and setbacks from time to time in their school careers, such as stage fright at presentation time or disappointment over grades. But that doesn't have to mean that as parents we must launch a protest march down the road to the school. When my own children were small, I saw my job as helping them to cope with difficulties, rather than trying to make the school fit them.

I'm glad I decided to do that, because a growing body of literature on resilience and resistance to stress indicates that occasional frustrations can have positive results for kids in the long run. Children who experience no difficulties are as vulnerable later in life as are those who suffer from excessive stress. In other words, the normal ups and downs of life provide children with opportunities to develop immunities, just the way early experience with colds, earaches, and sore throats help build the immune system.

In the case of unhappy experiences in school, you have an important role to play in helping your children develop coping strategies. Here are some dos and don'ts.

**Do** help your child overcome anxiety by putting a message in his or her “psychological pocket.”

One of my sons came home from kindergarten one day early in the school year complaining that during circle time he “felt cold inside.” I believed then, and still do, that I knew what he meant. I asked him gently, “What time do you have circle time?” As he couldn't read at the time, he didn't know. I asked him about the morning schedule and deduced that circle time was at about 10:30 A.M. I then said to him, “Tomorrow during circle time, look at the clock. I will also look at the clock at around 10:30, too. Then remember that I'm thinking of you and sending good thoughts your way.” When my son was 27 years old and I was teaching in India, he wrote me in a letter, “When I think of you, I feel you right next to me—just the way I did way back in kindergarten!” He never forgot this coping strategy.

**Do** remind your child of how he or she coped with bad moments in the past.

Does your child get scared or cranky at the prospect of tests, presentations, or new classroom routines? I remember when one of my sons was in first grade, I went to school to pick him up early to take him to the dentist. He already had had a few minor dental problems and, needless to say, was not eager to return for more work. He fussed quite a bit about leaving school. I then said to him, “Remember how nervous you were the last time you went to the dentist?” “Yes, he said, almost tearfully.” I continued, “Remember how uncomfortable it was in the dentist's chair?” He shuddered and said, “Yes.” Then I added, “Remember how awful it was with all that stuff in your mouth while the dentist worked on your teeth?” By this time he was clearly distressed and nodded his head in agreement.

Then I said, “Remember how relieved you were and how wonderful you felt when it was all over?” To which he responded with a bright, positive, “Yes.” So I said, “It's going to be just like that all over again. You'll feel uncomfortable for a little while, and then it will be all over.” Off we went for the unwelcome appointment.

This strategy illustrates several important points.

- It is important not to pretend that an experience will be painless. Be honest with children so that they can trust you.
- By joining with our children to face up to the distressing experience, we encourage them.

- When children learn to use their past experiences to cope with anticipated discomforts, they've gained a strategy they can use throughout life.

**Do help your child focus on larger goals.**

Almost every child will have a teacher or classmate at some point whom he or she does not like. When such cases arise, you can be most helpful by saying something like: "Sure, I can imagine how unpleasant that must be. But there is no way that every child can like every teacher all the time, the same way that no grown-up can like every person he or she has to work with. Part of life is learning how to keep working at what really matters even if you can't enjoy all those you work with. The important thing for you to keep in mind is what you can learn from your teacher. A teacher doesn't have to be your favorite person for you to learn from him or her.

**Do model fairness, communication, and problem solving.**

When your child reports feelings of frustration about an incident or procedure at school, listen thoughtfully and probe gently to get the facts. In this way your child knows you care about his or her experience, but at the same time learns about how facts can get distorted under conditions of stress. For example, one of my sons reported with considerable indignation that during his creative writing class he asked the teacher if he could make a quick visit to the library. She replied that his class could only visit the library on Thursdays. "But I might not need the information on Thursday," he complained to me later. "I needed it today."

After offering a moderate dose of sympathy, I pointed out that if he had asked me if he could go to library, I would have said yes without hesitation. "But I know you," I added. I then explained that this teacher works with 150 youngsters per day and cannot know them all well. "How does she know you wouldn't wander off? And she is responsible for you! I'll bet she would really like nothing better than to have you make good use of the library!"

**Don't criticize your child's teacher or school in front of your child.**

Even young children can pick up on any worry, frustration, or disdain that you may feel. In the case of the youngest children, it is not unusual for them to attribute heroic qualities to their teachers, and overheard criticism may put a child in a bind over divided loyalties. In the case of older children, such criticism may foster rudeness or defiance to their teachers. Besides causing confusion, criticizing schools or teachers in front of children is not conducive to solving the underlying problem.

**Don't take your child's word as gospel.**

Getting the facts straight can be difficult for children as well as for adults. Whatever school concerns your child reports, listen carefully. Ask for details calmly and nonjudgmentally, and remember not to assume automatically that your child is in command of all the facts. If you simply accept your child's word and then react strongly, you may encourage him or her to exaggerate events.

**Don't tell white lies like "Everything will be fine."**

As the story about my son and the dentist illustrates, it is best to discuss openly with your child that some moments in life can be upsetting—that life is like that—but they pass. If you avoid discussing the downsides of life and try to sweeten distasteful experiences with white lies, you will lose credibility in the eyes of your child, and at the same time miss an opportunity to help him or her building resilience.

From Dr. Katz:

"For more than 35 years, I have been involved in early childhood education. I started out as a participating mother with my own three children in a parent/cooperative nursery school, and after my kids went off to elementary school, I became a teacher at another parent co-op. Ever since then I have been teaching, consulting with teachers of young children across the United States and in many other countries, and keeping current on the latest research on child development. All of this experience has provided opportunities for me to see schooling from the perspective of both a parent and a teacher."

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